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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
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COUNTRY Indochina (Laos)

SUBJECT Local Conditions/Transportation Arteries

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THIS IS UNEVALUATED INFORMATION

2. Laos is the least developed state in Indochina. A great deal of it is mountainous and densely wooded.
3. Saravane, in southern Laos, is in the center of the tea country. Cocoa is also raised in this area.
4. A series of small forts make it possible to drive in to Saravane from Khong-Sedone during the day. Saravane has a few stucco buildings; the rest are bamboo. As of 1954 it is headquarters for a small detachment of Laotian troops, commanded by French officers.
5. French supply convoys use the road along the Mekong up to Savannakhet, normally making three trips a week. The jungle has been cut back about 200 yards from the sides of the road to decrease the possibilities of ambush by Viet Minh patrols.
6. The road is open at seven in the morning and all traffic stops at sundown.
7. Savannakhet is not only a road terminus, but is also the hub of river traffic up and down the Mekong and across it by ferry to Thailand. Savannakhet has a large Chinese community of traders and hotel keepers.
8. The road running east from Savannakhet towards the coast is patrolled by the French. There are also a series of small forts along this road, close enough together so that the sound of small-arms fire at one can be heard at the next.
9. Some of these forts have radio communication facilities, but many do not. I understand that at one time these forts communicated with each other by beating on large gongs. This practice was given up when the Viet Minh set up gongs of their own in the jungle.

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10. The principal center of smuggling activities from Thailand to Laos is probably at Thakhek, up the Mekong River from Savannakhet. There is a good road from the railroad at Udon Thani to Muang Khoua Phanom, directly across the river from Thakhek. There is also a road running eastward from Thakhek into Viet Minh held territory.
11. When the Mekong River is high but not at flood stage, barge traffic is possible from Savannakhet to Vientiane. These barges are about 60 feet in length and from 10-15 feet in beam. Going upstream five or six barges are pulled by one wood burning tug and as many as 15 pulled by one tug downstream. The sides of these tugs are armored to protect the crews from small-arms fire. When the river is high, rafts of bamboo as much as a mile long are also floated down the Mekong.
12. Vientiane is both a river terminus and the northern end of a road from Udon Thani, Thailand.
13. There is a road from Vientiane running north to Luang Prabang but this has been cut for several years. Communication between Vientiane and Luang Prabang is either by air or by river boat when the Mekong is high.
14. All the houses near the river bank in Vientiane are built on stilts as the river rises out of its banks for some distance. At flood stage the Mekong is as much as two miles wide. There are four or five stucco houses in Vientiane and the remainder are made of teakwood.
15. The docking facilities at Vientiane are very primitive. There are no permanent docks. The barges are unloaded by simply running them up on the bank of the river or tying them to piles driven in the mud and building wooden ramps from the side of the ship to the shore.
16. Because of the seasonal nature of river traffic, gasoline and diesel fuel are flown into Vientiane from the south. As a result, fuel storage tanks are located at the airport.
17. From the airfield, located northwest of the town, an asphalt paved road runs into Vientiane. This is the only part of the Vientiane-Luang Prabang Road still in use.
18. A dirt road parallels the Mekong and runs from one end of Vientiane to the other. At the western end of town the road fizzles out in the jungle. To the east the road runs to a ferry which crosses the Mekong to Nong Khai, Thailand.
19. This **ferry** is operated by a Chinese and is powered by two outboard motors. It has a ramp in the bow which lowers to load and unload passengers and vehicles. This ferry can carry a small truck but is used largely for passenger traffic. The fare is three times as much from Laos to Thailand as it is from Thailand to Laos. There are no permanent ferry slips; the ferry simply runs up on the bank.
20. I saw very few autos or trucks in Vientiane and these were small, old, or both.
21. Vientiane also has its own radio station supplied by the US, complete with generating equipment. The transmitter was located at the airfield but I believe it has recently been moved as the transmitting tower proved to be a hazard to low flying aircraft.
22. The US mission also supplied a number of radio receiver sets to villages in the surrounding area. These sets were excellent but too complicated for the Laotians to operate and attempts are being made to simplify this equipment.
23. There is a small hospital in Vientiane which was built by the French. It is staffed with both French and Laotian doctors [who received their medical training in France]. I believe the hospital has its own electric generating equipment.

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24. There is a public market every day in Vientiane which takes place in the town square. This market consists of a great many small open stands where local produce can be bought or bartered for. I also saw some locally woven cloth of gold and silver thread as well as silver jewelry and ornaments.
25. The only restaurant in Vientiane overlooks the town square. It is partially owned by a Frenchman, whose name I do not recall, and the food is terrible.
26. The Laotians are not as anti-French as either the Vietnamese or the Cambodians. Laos is ruled ostensibly by a King and a cabinet of ministers, all of royal blood. However in the Laotian Government there are three Frenchmen to every Laotian; and to each cabinet minister, at least one French advisor.
27. I frankly do not believe that the Laotians much care whether they are ruled by the French or the Viet Minh. As long as somebody feeds them and looks after them they are not particularly interested in what his politics are.
28. There are a number of mineral deposits in Laos south of Xieng Khouang, including coal, silver and iron. However the terrain is so rugged and the native population so unenergetic that little has been done to develop these mineral resources.
29. As far as I know there is no railroad in Laos at the present time. For any large scale development of these mineral resources a railroad would have to be built. Because of the rugged topography this road would presumably be built from the railhead in Thailand at Udon Thani.
30. I believe that prior to World War II there was considerable interest shown by Japanese firms in developing these resources in Laos, and I understand that the Japanese would like to renew their efforts.
31. I do not believe that the French would object to a Japanese proposal to build a railroad into Laos from Thailand; since the French control the Laotian Government they would be able to take a cut of any mineral wealth brought out of Laos without having to expend any French capital in the process.

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